

Skills-based Medical Training Offers Prospect of a Brighter Future to Ukrainians Living with HIV/AIDS

Knowledge Hub Courses Combine International Expertise and National Best Practices to Help Ukrainian Specialists Provide ART to HIV/AIDS Patients

Every disease has a human face, and HIV is no exception. In fact, HIV has many faces that may be imagined in many ways—a child in pain, his mother exhausted by despair, or young men and women when they learn their life-altering diagnosis. These faces, however, reflect only one side of the epidemic. When treatment and compassion are available, HIV can be overshadowed by the faces of friends, loved ones, and other unique individuals with stories to tell and hopes to fulfill. In Ukraine, where 90,000 people are officially registered as HIV-positive and unofficial estimates are several times higher, the hope of a brighter future for those living with HIV/AIDS is increasingly becoming a reality.

“Today, I know I can live with this disease, but 10 years ago I was convinced that I was not long for this world,” says Maxim Nikolayenko, a patient at the HIV/AIDS Treatment and Care Department of the Gromashevsky Institute of Epidemiology and Infectious Diseases in Kiev. Nikolayenko remembers how department head Svetlana Antoniak helped dispel his angst long ago. “She told me ‘people in the West live with this problem and you will also live.’ In those days, that sounded like a challenge because there were no antiretroviral drugs in Ukraine and only intolerance toward people living with HIV/AIDS [PLWHA]. We survived because she and her colleagues cared about us.”

Only people who are themselves touched by HIV/AIDS realize how Ukraine’s burgeoning epidemic set off in the mid-1990s a battle for something no one should have to fight for in a civilized society—the right to life. It was a time when scarce healthcare funding allocated barely 50 cents a day for the feeding of gravely ill patients and requests by HIV-positive people to be seen at state-run hospitals and clinics were turned down without explanation. There

was no question of treating patients with antiretroviral therapy (ART) then—it was simply unavailable.

In the face of these dire conditions, Antoniak emerged as a legendary figure. Armed with optimism, she created a team of care providers from her department and representatives of public HIV service organizations founded by PLWHA. This multidisciplinary team has made the battle possible to endure by finding funds to buy medicines and gradually improve conditions for their patients. The alliance started to fight for patient rights, including the right to receive care through Ukraine’s public healthcare system. Lobbying the government for access to life-saving antiretrovirals and more extensive cooperation with international organizations were next on their agenda.

Slowly, changes were made. With its nurturing atmosphere and highly professional staff, Antoniak’s 20-bed department was the first place in Ukraine to administer ART. It became an oasis and people from all over the country flocked to Kiev. AIDS cases continued to rise until, in 2004, life-saving antiretrovirals to treat large numbers of patients arrived in Ukraine thanks to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

“Before that, only 100 people in the country enjoyed the privilege of ART, but thousands desperately needed treatment,” Antoniak says, stressing the fact that having the drugs does not automatically mean that people’s lives are saved. “For many years Ukraine was an isolated

country. We had no experience and there were no specialists who knew even a little bit about ART. We scavenged through the English-language literature, studying various regimens. We used WHO [World Health Organization] protocols as our practical guide. We collected crumbs of information then, finally, other international organizations came to our aid,” she recounts.

The Ministry of Health, the Ukrainian National AIDS Center, and several other organizations combined efforts to develop various ART protocols. “In 2003 we had the basic knowledge, but that’s not enough. You have to know how to put theories into action. We could only acquire this experience through close contact with western specialists who had been treating PLWHA for a few decades,” she explains.

The opportunity for Ukrainian doctors to initiate this contact came in March 2004 when the Regional Knowledge Hub for the Care and Treatment of HIV/AIDS in Eurasia was opened in Kiev through a



Yaroslava Lopatina (left) and Svetlana Antoniak (right) with Angela and Maksim (center), two of their patients at the HIV/AIDS Treatment and Care Department. The couple says these doctors are like family to them.

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WHO project funded by the German Society for International Cooperation (GTZ). Managed by the American International Health Alliance (AIHA) in cooperation with national and international strategic partners, the Knowledge Hub's mission is to help Ukraine—and other countries in the region—train qualified specialists to provide effective treatment and care to PLWHA.

The opening of the Knowledge Hub was timely because it preceded the August 2004 launch of nationwide efforts to provide ART, Antoniak recalls. "It was a heady time. We had to introduce the therapy while simultaneously training specialists. The coordination of these efforts was a notable achievement of the Ministry of Health, the National AIDS Center, and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, which was the principle recipient of a Global Fund grant to Ukraine," she says. "This grant financed the training of Ukrainian specialists and AIHA and other strategic partners at the Knowledge Hub provided crucial technical assistance."

AIHA tapped international HIV/AIDS experts with both clinical and teaching experience, along with regional HIV experts, as faculty for the Knowledge Hub, which began offering courses designed to arm healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills they need to provide comprehensive treatment and support to PLWHA. Antoniak and her colleagues were also asked to be instructors, while the HIV/AIDS department itself became the clinical base for the Knowledge Hub. AIHA and other stakeholders developed curricula to address key HIV topics. Each course features lectures, case studies, interactive discussions, role plays, and—most important—practical training in clinical settings.

"The Knowledge Hub gives healthcare professionals the skills they need for use at a patient's bedside," Antoniak affirms. In other words, course participants don't merely to listen to lectures on theory. They also practice what they learn through interaction with each other and with real patients. Another key element of the Knowledge Hub methodology is its strong focus on continuous follow-up training and clinical mentoring. After a group of

participants completes a five-day course, instructors travel to various regions of the country to help the newly trained healthcare providers select the most appropriate candidates for ART and prescribe the correct treatment regimens. After several months, trainees return to Kiev for more in-depth study of ART.

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"Thanks to these training cycles, physicians are administering treatment with greater skill. They learn the importance of closely monitoring each patient and work to improve the relationship between clinicians and patients," Antoniak says, stressing that when it comes to treating HIV, there is nothing more important than trust. "Doctors should set an example of treating patients as human beings. That is the only way they can provide effective care to PLWHA because doing so requires understanding their problems."

Acknowledging that the Knowledge Hub's work has brought about changes in Ukraine's system of care for PLWHA, Antoniak continues, "We were able to introduce the team approach to HIV/AIDS care. This model involves close collaboration among doctors, nurses, and social workers to better address medical issues and provide the psychological and social support each patient needs. It helps us free doctors from the burden of dealing with every little problem, while at the same time ensuring patient adherence to therapy, improving quality of life, and bringing our system of care up to international standards."

As of April 2006, the Knowledge Hub has trained 76 care teams in Ukraine; 30 were trained in specialized pediatric care thanks to funding from UNICEF and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. Representatives from 24 Ukrainian regions have received training and the HIV/AIDS care team approach is operational in 19 of Ukraine's 26 oblasts. In real numbers that translates into 636 Ukrainian care providers trained. These practitioners are now treating 3,186 patients in 24 regions spanning the country. By the end of 2006, another 500 Ukrainian doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals will have been trained by the Knowledge Hub.

Today, approximately 600 people are receiving antiretrovirals in Kiev and the life-saving therapy is increasingly available in other cities. "It is gratifying to see that the doctors involved in caring for PLWHA living in the regions are working with a high degree of self-sacrifice. All of them have enhanced their level of knowledge and now they feel a strong sense of duty to the patients who come to them for help," Antoniak says, noting with satisfaction that thanks to the Knowledge Hub, the practitioners have begun to work together more closely and exchange experiences.

"In the time since the Knowledge Hub was established, we have surmounted a huge obstacle by breaking down a system that kept us closed off from our colleagues here in Ukraine and around the world, as well as from a whole group of patients who need us desperately," Antoniak stresses, explaining that only through close collaboration and complete mutual understanding is it possible to create effective care services for PLWHA in Ukraine. The goal, she concludes, is to create a system in which there will be no place for discrimination, where patients will feel that they are valued members of society with full civil rights and a guaranteed future.



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